

CAREER PROS: New Interest in Older Jobseekers

by John Challenger

The most compelling quality a jobseeker can possess in today's employment market apparently is to be over the age of 55, according to newly revealed statistics.

Older workers are in high demand. As a result, the number of Americans working in their 50s, 60s, 70s and even 80s is at a record high, according to a new analysis of federal employment data by my company, the global outplacement firm of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc.

Unpublished Bureau of Labor Statistics data analyzed by Challenger show that employers are indeed embracing older workers and jobseekers. As of August, the number of workers 55 and older reached 24.6 million, the highest level ever recorded. About one-fourth of those older workers (5.2 million) were 65 and older. That is a giant leap of 45 percent from 3.6 million in August 1996 and just below the record high of 5.4 million set in May.

The number of older workers is not only growing, it is growing faster than any other age group. The Challenger analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data found that employment among workers 55 and older grew 10.5 percent between 2003 and 2005. The pace did not drop for those 65 and older, whose ranks of employed grew 10.5 percent from an average of 4.6 million in 2003 to 5.1 million in 2005.

Those increases are more than double the 4.1 percent growth rate experienced by 45- to 54-year-olds. Meanwhile, 35- to 45-year-olds saw employment fall 0.7 percent.

Shorter Job Search

The preference for older workers has also resulted in a significant drop in the amount of time it takes jobseekers 50 and older to find new positions.

The Challenger survey of 3000 jobseekers in the second quarter of 2006 found that the median job search time for those 50 and older was virtually equal to that of younger applicants.

Further evidence of employers' acceptance of older workers is found in the latest statistics from the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The number of age-discrimination complaints filed in fiscal year 2005 fell to 16,585, down 7.0 percent from 2004 – the fewest charges since 2000 when 16,008 age-related charges were filed with the agency.

In 1948, one in four 65-year-olds was employed. That percentage steadily fell to a low of 10 percent in the mid-1980s. The percentage of working retirees has been on the rise since the mid-1990s and it may not be long before we are back to the 25-percent level not seen since 1951.

The coming surge in the percentage of employed retirees will be led by the baby-boom generation, 70 percent of whom plan to continue working during their retirement years, according to recent surveys by AARP.

That fact will make it harder for older job candidates to land new positions since they will face fierce competition from baby boomers.

Old Myths Dispelled

Employers are learning through experience that most if not all of the long-held common perceptions about older workers simply are not true. For example, the greatest misperception about older workers was that the diminishing health that accompanies aging would be too costly in terms of increased absenteeism and higher health insurance costs.

In fact, today's seniors are much healthier. Many employers have probably found that older workers take no more sick days than their younger counterparts.

Older workers have also put to rest age-related myths regarding their energy levels, productivity, enthusiasm, facility to learn new concepts and techniques, and ability to get along with younger workers.

The biggest obstacle to the current pace of employment growth among older workers will not be age bias, but competition from other older jobseekers. Older workers are already making it more difficult for younger employees to move up the ladder. The same gridlock is going to make it more difficult for other well-experienced job candidates to get a foot in the door.

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